English Cultural Conversations – Part 1

Comparing Cultures Around the World

B2–C1 Level |

Emma: I've always believed that travelling becomes much more meaningful when you try to understand how people think and live, rather than simply visiting famous places and taking photographs.

Daniel: I completely agree, because a country's culture is not limited to its food, traditional clothes, or historical buildings; it also influences the way people communicate, raise their children, organize their working lives, and build relationships.

Emma: After spending time in Japan, Italy, and Morocco, I realized that many behaviors I had considered completely normal were actually habits I had inherited from my own cultural background.

Daniel: Japan is a fascinating example because social harmony seems to influence everyday behavior, particularly in public places where people appear highly conscious of how their actions might affect those around them.

Emma: I noticed that especially on trains, where passengers generally avoid loud conversations and unnecessary phone calls, creating an atmosphere that feels almost unusually quiet compared with some Mediterranean countries.

Daniel: That contrast becomes even clearer in Italy, where conversations can be energetic, emotional, and surprisingly loud without necessarily being interpreted as aggressive or disrespectful.

Emma: Exactly, and during an Italian family dinner, I sometimes saw several people talking at the same time, interrupting one another, laughing loudly, and still maintaining a remarkably friendly atmosphere.

Daniel: Someone accustomed to a more orderly communication style might interpret those interruptions as rude, whereas Italians may see them as evidence that everyone is genuinely interested in the conversation.

Emma: Japan presents almost the opposite situation, because interrupting someone can be considered inappropriate, and allowing another person to finish speaking may demonstrate respect rather than passivity.

Daniel: That difference shows how difficult it can be to judge behavior accurately when we interpret everything through the social rules we learned while growing up.

Emma: Another interesting difference concerns disagreement, because some cultures value directness and consider openly expressing an opposing opinion a sign of honesty.

Daniel: In other cultures, however, people may avoid saying “no” directly because maintaining harmony and preventing embarrassment can sometimes be considered more important than expressing disagreement immediately.

Emma: Japan is particularly interesting in that respect, because a pause, an indirect expression, or even a change in tone can communicate hesitation without anyone explicitly saying that they disagree.

Daniel: Someone unfamiliar with those signals could easily assume that everything is acceptable simply because nobody has openly objected.

Emma: Italy and Turkey, on the other hand, often seem more comfortable with emotional disagreement, where people can argue passionately about politics, football, food, or family matters and still remain close afterwards.

Daniel: That's an important point because disagreement itself does not necessarily indicate hostility; in some cultures, arguing enthusiastically can actually be part of maintaining a relationship.

Emma: Hospitality provides another fascinating comparison, particularly between cultures where offering food is mainly practical and cultures where repeatedly offering food is almost a demonstration of affection.

Daniel: I experienced that in Morocco, where being invited into someone's home could quickly turn into a long meal, several rounds of tea, and repeated encouragement to eat more even after I had already said I was full.

Emma: I've experienced something similar in Turkey, where refusing an offer once does not always mean the host will immediately stop offering it because the host may interpret your first refusal as politeness.

Daniel: In some Northern European countries, however, people may respect a person's first refusal much more literally and avoid insisting because personal boundaries are given greater importance.

Emma: That brings us to privacy, which is another area where cultural expectations can differ considerably.

Daniel: Yes, in some societies it is perfectly normal for relatives or close friends to ask about someone's salary, marriage plans, age, or family situation, whereas in other cultures those questions would be considered deeply personal.

Emma: Someone asking such a question may not intend to be intrusive at all; they may simply be expressing interest according to the social rules they grew up with.

Daniel: Exactly, which is why judging someone's intentions before understanding their cultural context can easily lead to unnecessary misunderstandings.

Emma: Family relationships are also worth comparing because the meaning of independence can be quite different from one country to another.

Daniel: In some Western societies, young adults are often encouraged to leave home relatively early and make independent financial and personal decisions, while in other cultures living with parents for many years is completely normal.

Emma: And remaining with your family does not necessarily mean that someone lacks ambition or independence, because extended families can provide emotional support, financial cooperation, and practical assistance.

Daniel: At the same time, living in a close family structure can sometimes make privacy and personal decision-making more complicated, particularly when several generations have strong opinions about the same issue.

Emma: Marriage is probably one of the clearest examples of this difference, because the role played by parents and relatives can range from almost nothing to a very significant influence.

Daniel: In some families, parents may actively participate in introducing potential partners or discussing compatibility, while in other societies the idea of family involvement in such decisions might seem completely inappropriate.

Emma: Neither approach should automatically be described as better, because the important question is whether the individuals involved have genuine freedom and whether their decisions are respected.

Daniel: I agree, and the same principle applies to parenting, because parents in different cultures can have completely different ideas about discipline, academic achievement, independence, and respect for authority.

Emma: In some countries, children are encouraged to question teachers and parents because critical thinking is highly valued, while elsewhere children may be expected to listen carefully and avoid openly challenging older people.

Daniel: That difference can influence adults later in life, particularly when they enter workplaces where they are expected to express opinions, challenge inefficient procedures, or disagree with senior managers.

Emma: Workplace culture itself can be remarkably different, especially regarding hierarchy and communication between employees and managers.

Daniel: For example, some American workplaces can appear relatively informal, with employees addressing managers by their first names and openly sharing ideas during meetings.

Emma: Yet that informality does not necessarily mean that the organization has no hierarchy, because authority can still be reflected through salaries, responsibilities, decision-making power, and performance expectations.

Daniel: Japan offers another interesting model, where hierarchy can be more visible through language, professional etiquette, and expectations surrounding seniority.

Emma: I found it interesting that respect for experience and seniority can coexist with extremely modern technology and highly efficient working systems, which challenges the assumption that traditional values and modernity are opposites.

Daniel: That's an important observation because many countries combine ancient traditions with very modern lifestyles instead of choosing one and rejecting the other.

Emma: Food provides a good example of that combination, because a young person might use the latest technology, follow international fashion, and still consider traditional family recipes an important part of their identity.

Daniel: In Italy, for instance, food can represent family history and regional identity, so changing a traditional recipe may sometimes be viewed as more than simply changing ingredients.

Emma: In Japan, food presentation, seasonality, and attention to detail can communicate values such as discipline and appreciation of nature, rather than being purely matters of taste.

Daniel: And in Morocco, shared meals can strengthen social relationships because eating together often creates an environment where people spend time talking rather than treating food as something to consume quickly.

Emma: That leads naturally to attitudes toward time, which can also reveal deeper cultural differences.

Daniel: Germany is often associated with punctuality and careful scheduling, where arriving late can be interpreted as failing to respect another person's time.

Emma: In some other societies, social schedules may be more flexible, particularly for informal gatherings, although we should be careful not to turn broad cultural tendencies into stereotypes about every individual.

Daniel: Absolutely, because saying that a society has a more flexible relationship with time does not mean that everyone there is unreliable or incapable of planning.

Emma: Religion can also influence everyday culture in ways that visitors may not immediately notice, particularly through holidays, food choices, clothing, family traditions, and attitudes toward community life.

Daniel: At the same time, people belonging to the same religion can practice it very differently depending on their family background, education, local customs, and the historical environment in which they grew up.

Emma: That's why I think it is dangerous to assume that one person's behavior represents an entire country, especially when the observation comes from a short holiday.

Daniel: Exactly, because tourists usually experience only a small part of a society and often interact with people who work specifically in tourism, which can create a rather unusual picture of ordinary life.

Emma: Language creates another fascinating layer because languages themselves contain different ways of expressing respect, certainty, social distance, and politeness.

Daniel: English can sometimes appear relatively simple in that respect, while languages with formal and informal forms of address may require speakers to constantly consider the social relationship between themselves and the person they are talking to.

Emma: Even in English, though, politeness depends heavily on phrasing and tone, because saying “Give me that” and “Could you pass that to me?” communicates the same basic request but creates completely different social impressions.

Daniel: Personal space is another cultural feature that people often notice immediately, particularly when they move between societies with different expectations about physical distance during conversations.

Emma: Yes, and eye contact can be equally complicated because confidence in one culture may be interpreted as excessive directness in another.

Daniel: Gestures can cause even more confusion because a movement that communicates agreement or friendliness in one country may have a completely different meaning somewhere else.

Emma: Those misunderstandings can actually be useful if we respond with curiosity instead of embarrassment, because they force us to question assumptions that we normally never think about.

Daniel: That's probably one of the greatest benefits of travelling: you begin to realize that many things you describe as “normal” are not universal truths but simply behaviors you have become accustomed to.

Emma: Comparing educational systems makes the same point, because some countries place enormous importance on examinations and academic competition, while others give more attention to creativity, discussion, practical skills, or independent projects.

Daniel: Those approaches can shape students differently, particularly when they eventually enter university or professional life and discover that being knowledgeable is not always enough if they cannot communicate ideas confidently.

Emma: Globalization has obviously made some of these differences less visible because young people across the world now watch similar films, use the same social media platforms, listen to international music, and buy products from the same global companies.

Daniel: Nevertheless, global influences rarely erase local culture completely, because people usually adapt international trends to their own traditions rather than simply replacing their existing identity.

Emma: A teenager in Istanbul, Tokyo, or Rome might follow the same international musicians online while having completely different expectations about family responsibilities, education, relationships, and social behavior.

Daniel: People who grow up between cultures can develop an especially interesting perspective because they often learn to adjust their behavior according to the environment they are in.

Emma: That flexibility can be an advantage, although it may occasionally become exhausting because they have to think carefully about which social rules apply in each situation.

Daniel: I've noticed that myself after spending several years abroad, because there are still moments when I hesitate before doing something simply because I'm no longer certain whether it is considered polite in the environment I'm in.

Emma: Perhaps the healthiest approach is to remain observant without immediately becoming judgmental, especially when a custom seems strange or inefficient simply because it differs from what we are accustomed to.

Daniel: I completely agree, because cultural understanding does not require us to approve of every tradition; it simply requires us to understand why people value it before deciding what we personally think about it.

Emma: Once you understand the historical or social reasons behind a tradition, behavior that initially seemed unusual can suddenly become much more logical.

Daniel: History is crucial because traditions rarely appear randomly; many developed in response to geography, climate, religion, economic conditions, political events, or relationships between neighboring communities.

Emma: That's also why countries that are geographically close can still have surprisingly different attitudes toward family, communication, food, and social responsibility.

Daniel: And sometimes regional differences within the same country can be greater than the differences between two neighboring countries, particularly when the country has a large territory or a complicated history.

Emma: So perhaps the biggest mistake is trying to summarize an entire culture with five or six simple characteristics, because every society contains enormous diversity and continues to change.

Daniel: Exactly, and the more countries you visit, the harder it becomes to make simplistic assumptions because every new experience seems to provide another exception to something you previously believed.

Emma: I think that's what makes cultural travel so valuable: you return home not only knowing more about other countries, but also questioning some of the assumptions you had about your own culture.

Daniel: And ultimately, understanding cultural differences isn't about deciding which country has the best way of living; it is about recognizing that people can organize their lives according to very different values and still create meaningful relationships, stable communities, and satisfying lives.